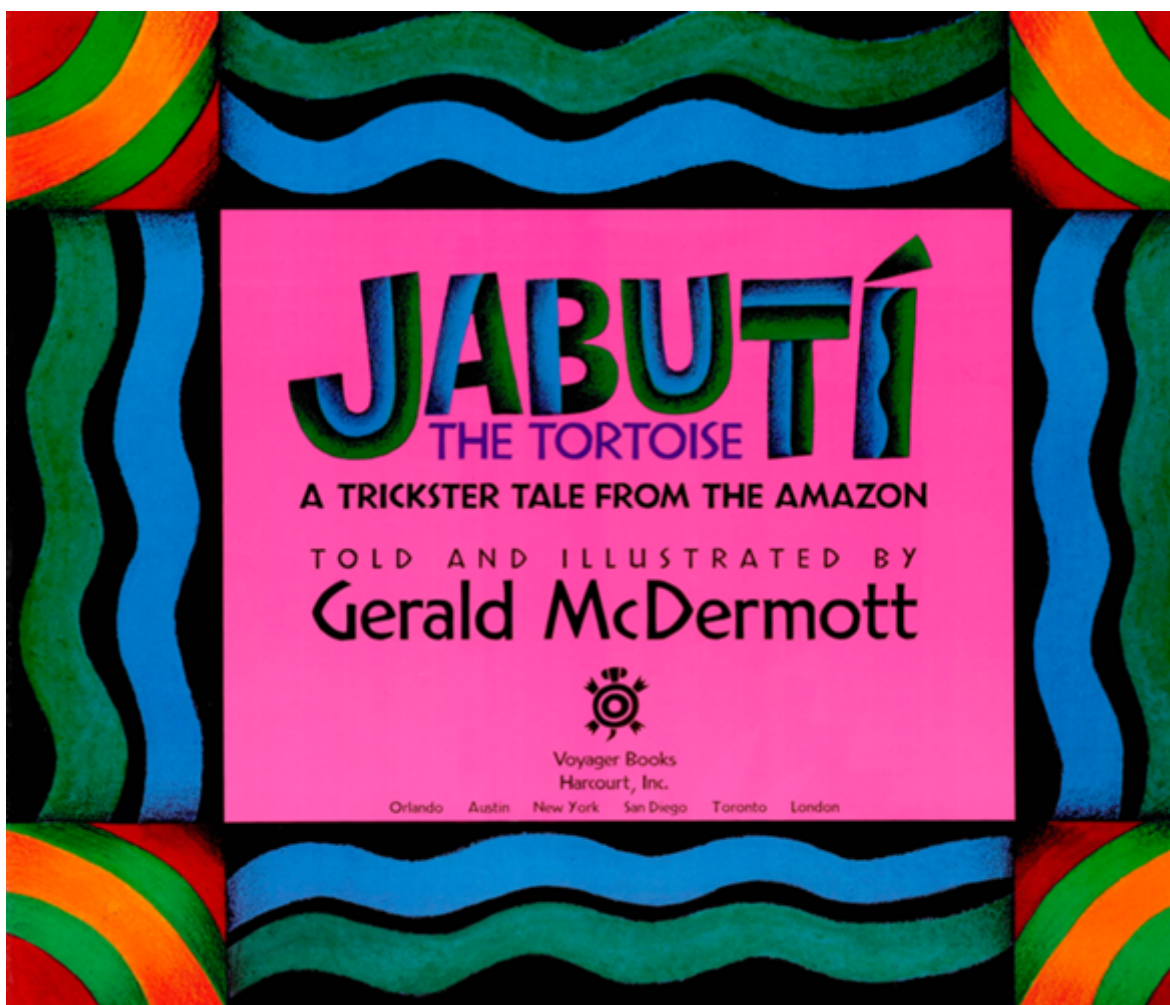


Jabutí The Tortoise

Gerald McDermott



Jabuti

THE TORTOISE
A TRICKSTER TALE FROM THE AMAZON

TOLD AND ILLUSTRATED BY
Gerald McDermott

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Summary: All the birds enjoy the songlike flute music of Jabutí, the tortoise, except Vulture, who, jealous because he cannot sing, tricks Jabutí into riding his back toward a festival planned by the King of Heaven.

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Jabutí (zha-boo-CHEE) is a central figure in the tribal lore of the Amazon rain forest. Slow and short-legged, the little tortoise is nevertheless portrayed as virtually invincible. Through his cleverness, he is able to overcome larger, often dim-witted foes. These mirthful trickster tales expose human foibles and are enjoyed throughout Brazil.

The first collection of Jabutí stories, from the oral tradition of the Tupi-Ciuarani and other rain forest tribes, was compiled by Charles Frederick Hartt and published in Rio de Janeiro in 1875 under the title *Os Mitos Amazônicos da Tartaruga*. Since then, the exploits of Jabutí have been retold countless times.

Scholars believe some of the Jabutí stories, like the tales of Brer Terrapin in the southern United States, have a common origin in West Africa. Another cross-cultural link is the King of Heaven, the great god Tupan, who appears throughout the native mythology of the Americas as Thunderbird. The motif of the turtle tumbling from the sky is found in many different traditions, with examples as venerable as Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Eagle," and "The Turtle and the Oeese" from the Panchatantra of ancient India.

In the present story, even though Jabutí's world is turned upside down, a universal trickster theme prevails: Creation comes from chaos.

—G. M.



For Tomás and Sofia





His music wove through the tangled vines
and floated above the treetops. All the
creatures of the rain forest listened to his song.

Jabutí the tortoise played a song on his flute.

His shell was smooth and shiny, and his song was sweet.

His music wove through the tangled vines
and floated above the treetops. All the
creatures of the rain forest listened to his song.



For some, Jabuti's song was sour.

Jaguar could remember when Jabuti
tricked him into chasing his own tail.

Lizard could remember when Jabuti
tricked him into giving Jabuti a ride on his back.



Lizard could remember when Jabuti
tricked him into giving Jabuti a ride on his back.





Tapir could remember when Jabuti
tricked him into a tug-of-war with Whale.





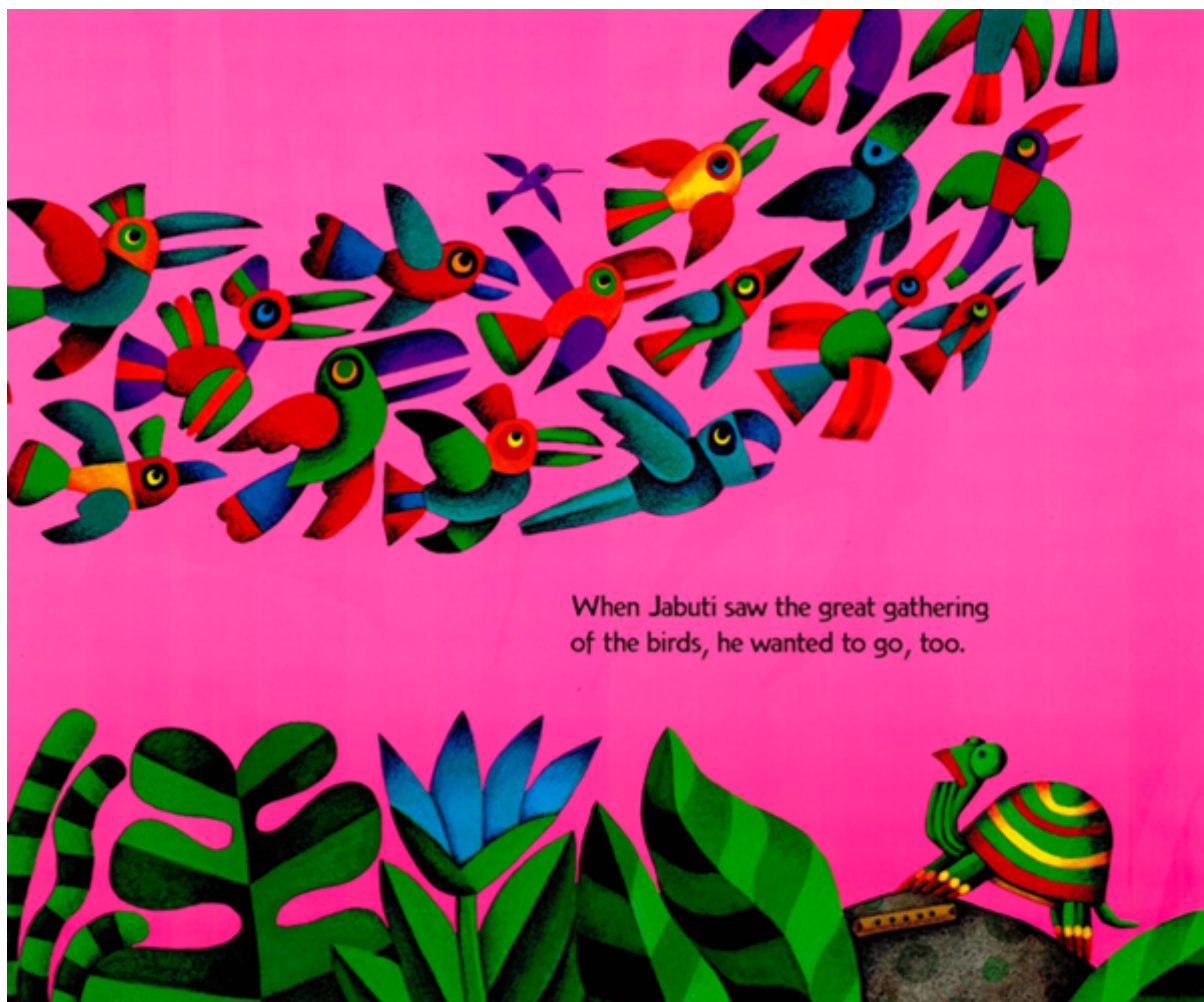
All except Vulture, who could not sing at all.
He was jealous of Jabuti and waited for the
day when he could eat the little tortoise.

But the birds of the air loved Jabuti's music,
and they sang when he played.

All except Vulture, who could not sing at all.

He was jealous of Jabuti and waited for the
day when he could eat the little tortoise.





When Jabuti saw the great gathering
of the birds, he wanted to go, too.

There came a time when all the birds of the air
were invited to a festival in heaven. The King
of Heaven called them together to sing, to rejoice,
and to receive his blessing.

When Jabuti saw the great gathering
of the birds, he wanted to go, too.



"I want to play my flute for the King of Heaven," he said.
Vulture laughed at him.

"I may not be able to make music like you," said Vulture,
"but I can spread my wings and soar all the way to heaven."

"Take me with you," Jabuti pleaded.

Vulture saw his chance.

"Climb on my back, little friend," he said.



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Vulture spread his dark wings and rose up in the air.
Jabuti held tight to Vulture's feathers as they flew high
above the treetops. The dense forest and the great
river stretched far below.

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Jabutí held tight to Vulture's feathers as they flew high
above the treetops. The dense forest and the great
river stretched far below.



They had almost reached heaven when Vulture suddenly swooped and turned upside down. Jabuti lost hold of Vulture's feathers and slipped off his back.

Jabuti went tumbling down through the sky. The earth came rushing toward him, and he cried out:

*"Twigs and bushes,
Flowers and trees,
Move aside,
Make way for me!"*



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All the plants and trees of the forest spread apart to make way for Jabuti. But he had forgotten to call to the rock. Jabuti came down on it with a *crack!* and his smooth, shiny shell broke into pieces.



All the plants and trees of the forest spread apart to make way for Jabuti. But he had forgotten to call to the rock. Jabuti came down on it with a *crack!* and his smooth, shiny shell broke into pieces.



All the plants and trees of the forest spread apart to make way for Jabutí. But he had forgotten to call to the rock. Jabutí came down on it with a *crack!* and his smooth, shiny shell broke into pieces.

At that moment, the music of the festival in heaven stopped.
The King of Heaven looked down and saw Vulture joining
the other birds.

"Where is Jabuti?" asked the King of Heaven.

Vulture shrugged. "How would I know?" he answered.



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The King of Heaven looked down and saw Vulture joining the other birds.

"Where is Jabutí?" asked the King of Heaven.

Vulture shrugged. "How would I know?" he answered.



"Jabuti wanted to play for me, and you offered to bring him here," said the King of Heaven sternly. "Tell me where he is!"

Vulture turned away from the King of Heaven and hid his head beneath his wing.



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Vulture turned away from the King of Heaven and hid his head beneath his wing.





The birds filled the sky, flying high over the treetops,
swooping low through the tangled vines,
looking for the little tortoise.

The King of Heaven commanded the birds to search for Jabutí.

The birds filled the sky, flying high over the treetops,
swooping low through the tangled vines,
looking for the little tortoise.

Toucan, Macaw, and Hummingbird found Jabuti.
He was lying helplessly in the forest. His beautiful
shell was broken.

The birds gathered the pieces
and patched him together.

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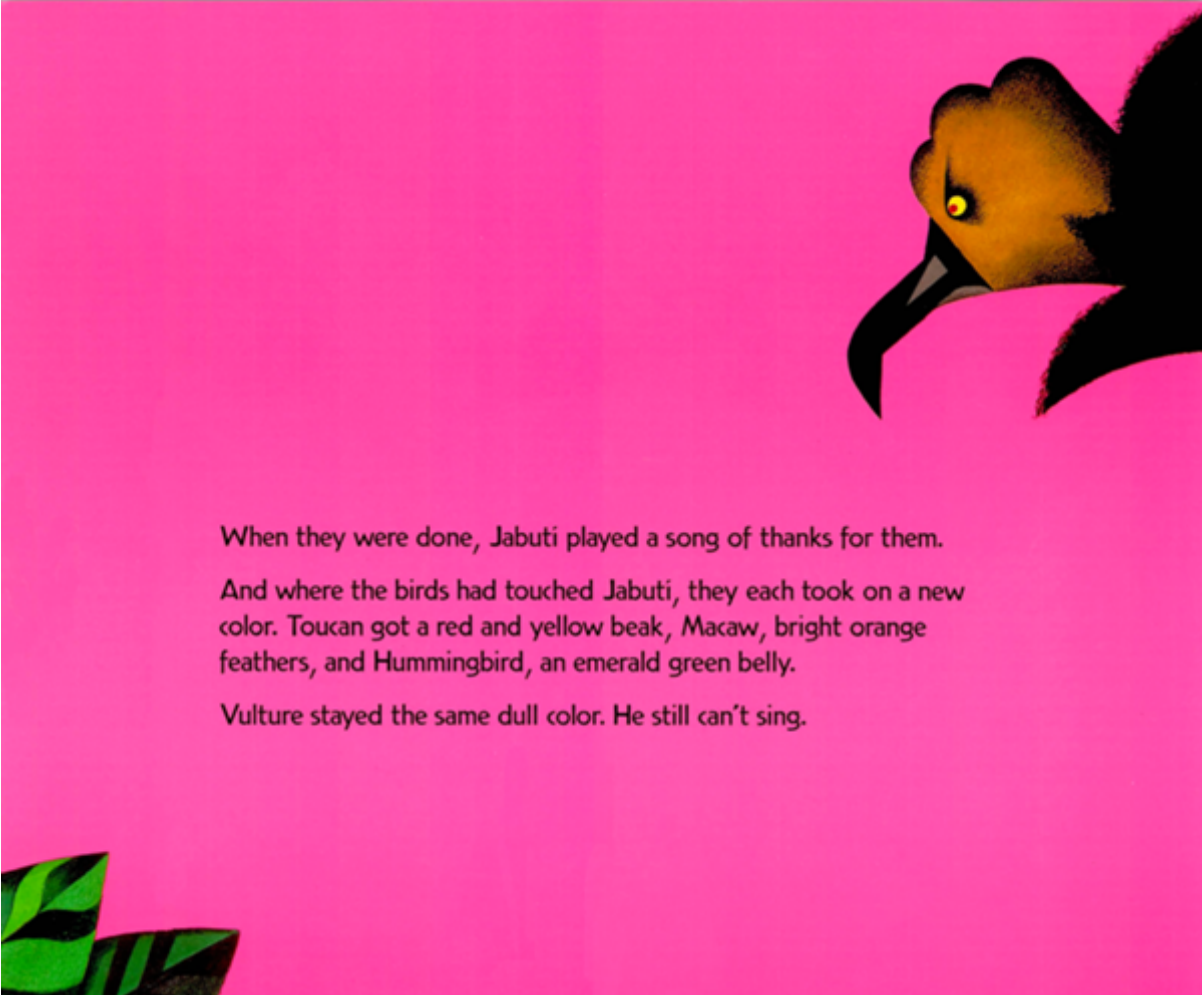


When they were done, Jabuti played a song of thanks for them.

And where the birds had touched Jabuti, they each took on a new color. Toucan got a red and yellow beak, Macaw, bright orange feathers, and Hummingbird, an emerald green belly.

Vulture stayed the same dull color. He still can't sing.





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Jabuti the tortoise plays on his flute.
His music weaves through the tangled vines
and floats above the treetops.
His shell may be cracked and patched,
but his song is sweet . . .
at least to some.

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